

A Commentary on the Third Epistle of John

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New International Version

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This letter, like 2 John, is from 'The Elder' and there is no further information to be added here. The previous letter was written to a Church but this is to an individual. We do not know who Gaius was; there is a very late tradition that he was the Gaius mentioned in Acts 20:4 and that John himself appointed him Bishop of Pergamum. However, Gaius was a very common name at that time and it is safer to make no guesses as to who he might be.

John refers to him as someone he loves in the truth. Although in the original there is no definite article, almost certainly John means more than that his love for him is sincere. He is speaking of the truth of Christ. Even today some people will occasionally end or sign their letters 'With Christian love' or, 'In the love of Christ'. John is speaking of his love for Gaius as a very dear Christian brother.

He observes the usual courtesy of the time by referring to his friend's health and general well-being except that, as a Christian, he links this to his spiritual health, using that as a sort of template - "I know that your spiritual state is excellent; may you be equally well in every other way also." He explains that he knows about the faithfulness Gaius has shown because some fellow believers have recently arrived bringing news of him and specifically mentioning his faithfulness. Walking in the truth is much more than holding the right doctrine; his belief is shown in the way he lives his life. John goes on to say that it is a particular joy to him, as with every Christian pastor, teacher or parent, to hear that 'his children' are living out their faith. By calling Gaius one of his children we may infer that John had something to do with his conversion or maturing.

5-8

We now come to what is the main purpose of the letter. It is to do with offering hospitality to travelling Christians, in particular missionaries. John does not have to ask Gaius to do this because he is already doing it. Apparently John is concerned that he may be persuaded not to continue to do it. In those days travel was a hazardous business and inns were notoriously dirty and their owners greedy. Inns were only for those who had no friends in the area, because the offering of hospitality was a recognised duty of all good citizens. If that was so for everyone, how much more of Christians towards fellow believers. Obviously, because of fallen human nature, there was the possibility that some itinerant teachers might impose on their hosts and in the Didache there is advice given in some detail that a true prophet will not stay for more than two or at the most three days and if he prophesies asking for money for himself, he is a false prophet! So John Commends Gaius for all that he is doing for the visitors, even though they are strangers to him. He calls it a 'loyal service'. Following, as it does what John has written in v.4, this service is part of Gaius walking in the truth; his behaviour demonstrates his faith. Apparently these visitors have come (or returned) to the Church where John is, and have publicly referred to the welcome they received from Gaius.

In the second half of v.6 John changes from the past to the future. Is he referring to the fact that these missionaries are about to come to Gaius again (indeed, might they be the ones bringing this letter? cf. v. 12) or is he talking generally of any missionaries who may come to him in the future? There is the implication that more is required than hospitality while they are with him. He is to 'send them on their way' in a worthy manner. Probably this means he should supply them with provisions for the next stage of their journey, possibly including money.

The phrase 'they went out', implies a very deliberate setting forth and, as Barclay remarks, could possibly refer to Gentile converts who have left friends and family because of their new allegiance to the name of Jesus. Such might well be destitute and would need the help

of other believers. However, it is much more likely in its context (especially v.8) that John is speaking about missionaries. In other words, these were not a group of believers who happened to be travelling and would be grateful for hospitality; they were missionaries who had set out from their home Church with the specific purpose of preaching the truth of Jesus. In view of that they could not expect, and would not ask for, financial help from heathens. This does not mean that there are not certain causes which non believers, even atheists, might be happy to support alongside Christians. For instance, many of our Church buildings are no longer essential to the Church but might be a national heritage which the whole population may wish to preserve. However, the financial support of full-time Christian workers is something which is the responsibility of believers alone. For this reason, whatever else we may support financially, the care of full-time Christian workers must be the priority of believers. By doing this we are co-operating in spreading the truth. It is true that to support mission financially could be a substitute for doing the work ourselves, but not everyone is called to this particular work, and to give generously is a spiritual gift (Rom. 12:8). John may mean that in this way we become fellow workers with those actually 'out in the harvest field', or he may mean that we are 'allies of the Truth' (Moffat); that is, both those who go out and those who support them are working with the truth.

9-10

John has already shown the purpose of the letter - to encourage Gaius to receive the itinerant prophets or teachers who come in the name of Christ; now he reveals what gave rise to it. There is an individual in the Church where Gaius is who is causing trouble, Diotrephes. John lays two charges against this man. First, he will not accept John's authority and secondly he will not offer hospitality to visiting Christian teachers nor will he allow others to do so but he excommunicates them. We may wonder that anyone who shows such a lack of charity had any influence in the Church and so, even allowing for the fact that he had a very forceful personality, there must be more to this than at first appears.

It seems most likely that this is an example of a problem that must have arisen in the early Church, particularly as the original apostles and teachers began to die. The problem is still with us today; how do you preserve the unity of the whole Church yet recognise the autonomy of the local Church? Diotrephes had either assumed or been appointed to leadership of his Church. John says, 'he loves to be first'. The NEB translates that as 'their would-be leader'; however, it may well be that he had been appointed an elder (especially as he was apparently claiming the right to excommunicate members) but, if so, he would have been only one amongst others. It seems that he resented any challenge to his personal authority and would not accept instructions even from John, nor did he welcome teachers from outside. If this was so, then his refusal to offer hospitality to such visitors was not simply bad manners, it was an outcome of his policy not to allow any interference in the authority of the local Church. This would also account for the fact that he had not accepted a letter which John had written to the Church. Whether that means he had not allowed the Church to see the letter or had simply discounted it, we do not know; but the point John is making is that Diotrephes will have nothing to do with him. Not only does he not accept his authority, he actually spreads malicious gossip about him. John does not attempt to deal with that in this letter but says that when and if he comes he will confront the situation then. However, from what he writes we see that the real problem is not whether the local Church should or should not be autonomous but that Diotrephes is a power seeker. He is not arguing a point of principle; he is fighting for his own aggrandisement.

11-12

John does not argue his own personal position and attempt to encourage Gaius to continue to respect his authority, he takes the matter onto another ground - do what is right and good, not what is evil. In fact the word he uses is 'imitate'. We all have our heroes and, especially in our formative years, seek to emulate them. This is why sporting and pop stars have such an influence on young people. We, also, commend or betray Christ by our own behaviour. How we live, whether we do good or evil, reveals what we are; whether we are good or evil. John goes even further, it reveals whether we know and follow God or not. Our life is shaped by what we believe. It isn't simply that life runs better and more smoothly in society if we all do right rather than wrong; for the Christian it is a matter of knowing and delighting in God and seeking to please and obey him. Anyone who behaves in an evil manner cannot possibly have understood who God is; they just have not 'seen' it or him.

John suddenly introduces Demetrius. We do not know much about him. A silversmith named Demetrius is mentioned in Acts 19:23 but he was objecting to Paul speaking against the goddess Artemis and ruining his trade. Demas (probably a shortened form of Demetrius) was one of Paul's fellow workers who later deserted him for the world (2 Tim. 4:10). It is unlikely that this Demetrius was either of them. There is a report that John later appointed a Demetrius Bishop of Philadelphia and it may well be this man, but we cannot be certain. From the way John writes it seems that Gaius has not met him before. He has a good reputation from everyone and that is confirmed by the truth itself. The latter is an unusual phrase but probably means that the truth about Demetrius is self evident. John adds a third commendation that he himself values him and Gaius knows that he can trust John's opinion. It may very well be that Demetrius is the one bringing the letter.

13-14

John ends the letter in a very similar manner to the way he ended the second letter: there he spoke of paper and ink, here of pen and ink, but he has the same hope to visit soon and talk face to face. In view of this he will confine the letter to just one piece of papyrus and all the other things he wants to mention can wait until then.

Although the Jewish greeting of peace is very common and to be expected (in the second letter it comes at the beginning) no doubt Gaius would need it if he was going to stand up to Diotrophes. It is a little unusual to refer to the believers as friends rather than brethren but there is no more significance about this than between paper and ink and pen and ink. John asks that Gaius should not just pass on his greetings generally but to each of the believers by name. Obviously John must know them personally.

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